

A Missionary's Evaluation of Time:

--The Coming of Christ

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"... for the time is at hand"

Revelation 1:3; 22:10

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I have two texts. They both come from the same book and they both read the same way. The first is recorded in Revelation 1:3. The second is recorded in Revelation 22:10. This statement, "For the time is at hand," appearing twice in this book, once in its closing words, bind together the message of this book. In unfolding the message of this statement, three things need our attention.

The Nearness of Those Things That Are Recorded

A literal rendering of this statement from the original Greek would read: "For the time is near." Concerning the fact of nearness, it is impossible to understand its meaning without knowing the Old Testament background. Some five hundred years before Christ, when the people of Israel were confined in bondage in the land of Babylon, their hearts cried out for some information concerning the future. What did it hold for them? Would they remain in captivity? Would they be released from captivity? Would they remain in this land, or have opportunity to return to their homeland? Would it be their privilege to restore again those sacred sites and places? What did the future hold?

This plaintive cry of their hearts gave voice to one of the greatest

prayers recorded in the Bible, the prayer of the Prophet Daniel, recorded in chapter 9. Even before he had finished the prayer, the answer had come. The answer is in many respects the most significant eschatological passage in the Old Testament. It is the prophecy of the seventy weeks (Dan. 9:24-27).

These seventy weeks are weeks of years totaling four hundred ninety in all. They are for the purpose of finishing something. In general it is to finish the course and career for Israel under the Old Testament law (v. 24). These years begin with the issue of the decree of Artaxerxes to permit the people to return to their land (v. 25). They conclude with the final week of years under a Roman prince (v. 27). This period is divided into two segments, the first consisting of sixty-nine weeks or 483 years, and the second the seventieth week of seven years.

With respect to the first segment, one may begin counting the years immediately and consecutively from the decree of Artaxerxes until 483 years have passed. It brings one to that day when Christ rode down the Mount of Olives on the colt—the foal of an ass—crossed the Brook Kidron, ascended Mount Moriah, entered in through the golden gate of the city and offered himself to the people

as their king (vv. 25-26). Then something happened—Messiah was cut off. He was cut off from His people by rejection. He was cut off from life by crucifixion. He was cut off from this earth by ascension.

Now it might be expected that the final week of years would follow immediately and consecutively as the first 483. But in the one thousand and nine hundred years and more that have succeeded, there is not one period of seven years that fulfills the prophecy of verse 27. It must therefore be concluded that that period is yet future.

Concluding the prophecy of Daniel, the angel announced to him: "But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end" (12:4). As if that were not sufficient, these words are repeated again in verse 9. "And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end." This means that no creature, natural or supernatural, can open the book and unseal its message until the time of the end. This naturally leads one to ask for identification of the end.

Returning again to Daniel 9, it refers to an end in verse 26 when the city of Jerusalem will be destroyed by the people of the coming Roman prince. This happened at the first

coming of Christ. Inasmuch as both Old and New Testaments agree that the coming of Christ is to characterize the end, it is significant that Christ's first coming initiated the end, and His second coming will terminate the end. This means that the end has now stretched out into more than one thousand and nine hundred years, enlarging our conception of the longsuffering of a gracious God.

Ten days after Christ went back to glory a new thing was created on the day of Pentecost. The church was born. Sixty years slipped by, and during that time, no period of seven years fulfilled the prophecy of the seventieth week. Then by decree of Emperor Domitian, the Apostle John was banished to the rockbound island of Patmos. There on that forsaken spot, the greatest revelation ever given to man was given to John. In the opening words of that revelation Christ said to him: "For the time is at hand" (v. 3). When the revelation was completed, He commanded him to "Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand" (v. 10).

The burden of the Book of Revelation is the unfolding and enlargement of the prophecy of Daniel 9:27. From chapter 4 through chapter 19 the events making up that final week in the history of Israel are set forth. It is significant to realize that one thousand and nine hundred years ago, the Lord Jesus gave His last word to the church the assertion that this period was near. If it was near then, it is one thousand nine hundred years nearer now.

The Imminency of Those Things Revealed

By the term imminent, it is meant that an event is possible at any moment. And if it is possible at any moment, then it is an event toward which there should be constant expectation. Our Lord declared just before He went away: "I will come again" (John 14:3). But He did not name any date. It must therefore be presumed that He may come any time. Through all the history of the Christian church, amazing ingenuity has been displayed in the effort to escape clear meaning, and it began with the disciples.

To His disciples, Christ declared concerning His return: "But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father" (Mark 13:32). In this statement He made it clear that no human being knows the time; in fact, no supernatural being knows the time; even more than that, not even the sovereign Son of God knows the time. This is one item of information upon which He has limited himself. There is only one who knows and that is the Father. But the disciples still did not grasp the meaning. During His post-resurrection ministry, they came to Him again and asked: "Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" To which He had to reply: "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power" (Acts 1:6-7).

In these two verses, both of them from the lips of the Lord Jesus, four different words for "time" appear. In the word "hour" Christ referred to a point of time; in the word "day" to a more extended period; in the word "season" to a still more extended period; and in the word "times" to the grand sweep of time. I do not see how He could have used four words that would more adequately describe every aspect of time. And over all of it He made it clear that knowledge of His return is known only to the Father. But in spite of this, men go right on trying to set the date. Hence there is just one practical reason: if the date can be reasonably determined, it will not be necessary to prepare for this event until immediately prior to it.

If I were to say that Christ will come in a thousand years, almost any one could shrug that off. If I say He will come in a hundred years, few there are who will be apt to pluck the bloom from the century plant. If I say ten years, even that is a long time. Who will respond with urgency to that date. But suppose we made it a year. How many are there who would do anything about preparation until the time was almost upon them. Think of a week. If in seven days Christ were to return, how would we live the next few days? Think in terms of twenty

four hours. What would be our response to an announcement like that? I think everyone should answer that between himself and the Lord.

But I cannot assert any of these things. However, I am prepared to declare authoritatively, on the basis of the Word of God, that Christ may come back at any time. More than one thousand and nine hundred years ago, as the last word to His church, He declared that "the time is at hand." The passing of these one thousand and nine hundred years has brought that event that much closer. One of these days the last soul will be added to the church and Christ will return to catch His bride away, and in that event He will usher in the final week of years in the history of Israel. True to His promise, He came once. And with equal faithfulness, we may be sure that He will come again.

The Opportunity for Christians Until Christ's Return

A most significant word for "time" appears in the text. It is a word which refers to time charged with opportunity. It means the fitting, suitable proper time in which an event should occur. The meaning can best be illustrated by reference to texts where the word is used.

In Matthew 13:30, Christ tells the parable of the wheat and tares. He says: "Let both grow together until the harvest; and in the *time* of harvest." There is a fitting, suitable, proper time in which to gather in the produce of the ground. Every farmer knows that. And there is a fitting, suitable, proper time to plant. If the farmer were to get these two confused, he would be in great trouble.

In II Corinthians 6:2, the same word is used in a text most Bible students have learned to quote: "For he saith, I have heard thee in a *time* accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted *time*; behold, now is the day of salvation." This can only mean that the fitting, suitable, proper time to be saved is now. Not tomorrow; not next week; not next year. Right now. There are those who are constantly putting this matter off for a more convenient season. But

there is none. And it may be added that now is the time for proclaiming the good news of salvation.

In I Corinthians 4:5, Paul wrote to a church that was split four ways. There were four leaders in this congregation who were vying for prominence. Every member of this church was joined to one or another of these teachers. The factionalism which developed resulted in one group judging another. The conclusions which they came to were not correct because they were unable to see things in true perspective, and they had too few facts with which to work. So Paul had to write: "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come." Certainly no more fitting, suitable, or proper time for judgment exists. At this time the work of salvation will be completed, and the scales will have fallen away from the eyes of every believer. He will then be able to see the multiplied facts in their true perspective.

I call attention to one more passage of Scripture, Galatians 6:9-10, where the same word appears: "And let us not be weary in well doing; for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." In verse 9 the word "season" is the same word for "time"; and in verse 10 it is translated "opportunity."

The period of time we call "now," which intervenes between the present and that moment when Christ shall come, is the fitting, suitable, proper time in which to respond to God. For the sinner, it is his opportunity to be saved; for the saint, it is his opportunity to serve. Inasmuch as Christ declared that "the time is at hand" for His return, and this He did more than one thousand nine hundred years ago, it appears that any apathy in response toward this announcement is trifling of infinite dimensions.

The hazards of the highways should teach us this. I said to a congregation as I brought this message to a close, that in view of these hazards, no one had any assurance that he would reach home in safety. Little did I dream that within ten minutes this would be sealed to every heart in a horrible tragedy. A woman in her

sixties left the church to return home some five miles to pick up a warm dish and bring it back for a fellowship meal in the church. When she drove her car out on to one of the well-traveled highways, something went wrong, and she was driving down the left side of the highway. An oncoming car, traveling at a speed estimated by the traffic officers at eighty-five miles per hour, hit hers in a head-on collision. She was killed instantly, as well as the driver of the other car, also his fourteen-year-old son. The mother in the other car died a few hours later, and a four-year-old lad lived to be a cripple.

Does this accident suddenly alert us to the urgency of the hour? Is it possible that it takes such an event to awaken us to the lateness of, and the preciousness of, the time? Is it possible that we believe the Lord to the saving of our souls, but His last word to His beloved church we set aside as of little consequence? Think of it again, the last words He uttered more than one thousand nine hundred years ago were: "For the time is at hand."

There are few readers of Christian literature who have not come across the name of Robert Murray McCheyne. He was a minister of the Gospel who lived to be twenty-nine years of age. But in those years he accomplished more than many who lived a normal life span. At the conclusion of a board meeting in his church, he asked the old gentleman who was in charge: "Do you think Jesus will come tonight?" The old gentleman wrinkled his brow and ran his hand through his gray hair in reflection, and replied: "No, I don't think Jesus will come tonight." The pastor repeated this with each member of his board, and the response was the same with each. He then turned to Matthew 24:44 and read these words of Jesus: "In such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh."

There are many believers who profess with the lips that they believe in the imminent return of Christ. This is good and right, and this they ought to do. But men often profess with the lips certain articles of faith, but they do not bring their lives into conformity with the profession. Jesus

referred to an evil servant who said: "In his heart, My Lord delayeth his coming" (Matt. 24:48). This man began to engage in violence and dissipation as the moral result of his calculation in time. It is therefore proper to say that men may not live by what they profess with their lips, but they never fail to live by what they believe in their hearts.

The shadow on the sundial of this age has dropped low, and on the basis of the words of Jesus, our blessed Saviour, it is later than we think. "For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry" (Heb. 10:37). ▼

NO PRIVACY

Mr. Dunninger, the "Master Mentalist" reads people's minds, but now the General Electric Company has a new pick-up apparatus that requires no dictaphone in a room, but can pick up conversations inside a building up to a distance of three miles. A small sensitive device is merely attached to a building, and the distance apparatus beamed toward it, with the result that every sound is recorded. Yet some people seem to doubt the Bible teaching that the thoughts and intents of men's hearts are open to the Almighty!

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"Things couldn't be better . . . since we put HIM at the top."